
CAPTEL DISCONNECT

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ISSUE I

ADHERE TO THIS

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It's about 12:55 in the afternoon as I finally board the elevator to report in for my job at Captel. My shift starts right at 13:00, and I only have time for so much. I was lucky for once to have an elevator come right away, let's not take that luck for granted. Few and far between are the times when that happens. Generally you wait around awkwardly in the presence of one or two of these people you "work with," often up to around 5 minutes. I've already racked up too many points in this review period. Can't afford more right now.

As I finally made it up to the twelfth floor, I checked the time again and saw I had three minutes. I took advantage of the very little time I had to grab coffee from the break room, ice it down, and put it in my water bottle. Push come to shove, I clocked in on time and started accepting calls about a minute and a half after. Fluids, especially coffee, are an absolute necessity at this job. The constant talking into our headsets to re-voice what is being said on the calls can certainly take a toll on your voice—especially when the person is talking nonstop. And with so many of our clientèle being elderly, many of these folks have voices that just lullaby you right to sleep. You must be wired, and your voice must be fresh. Otherwise you won't make it in this zoo.

With that said, there is a downside to this. About two minutes after I punched in I received a notice from my supervisor asking me to come talk to him. When I arrived at the station, I remembered it was mid-month. I knew why I was called. Frank, my supervisor spun around in his chair towards me, "Sam! I got your mid-month adherence report here." I listened intently, I knew it wouldn't be so good. "Compliance is at least 95%, you're at 93. So you definitely want to try and step that up." I nodded "Yeah, sure" I wasn't in the mood for trying to debate something that wasn't in his control.

Choose your battles I suppose.

Over the course of the first hour of the day I spent my time listening and reiterating long-winded conversations of subject matter so bland it sometimes makes you question if you want to go on in life. Is this what we're headed for? Calling our parents to talk about salad for 30 minutes? Asking them if they want us to reserve a 2.5 grand loveseat for them? Just bragging about our kids? I hope not. I'm not sure how these folks talk at such great length about this, but they do. And often times, as I had said before, these folks either talk so fast it burns your throat out or so slow it puts you to sleep. My coffee was gone within a half hour, and that's when it hit me. The urge to take a restroom break was now impossible to ignore. I knew I had to do it, but I couldn't. That was the problem. My adherence was bad, so now, and for the rest of the month, I have to wait until my breaks come up go.

My next break is not until 15:00, and right now it's only 13:30. If I can just keep my mind off it, take the calls, read my book, everything will be fine. It's all mental for the most part. Alas, this has not been the case. 14:00 now, I'm straining to follow along with the

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beautiful prose of Ken Kesey, this basic need of mine all I can think of now. A call finally comes in. Thank god, I thought. Let this be a difficult call to keep these thoughts at bay. I can't take this. It didn't turn out that way at all, sadly. This

call was slow, easy, and had plenty of time for me to whimper gently in my desperation between the gaps in the callers conversation. At 14:30, that call ended, and despite it being only a half an hour until my next break, I knew I could not do this any longer. I got up, went into aux, and quite literally hobbled over to the bathroom. My entire pelvic region had become numb from withstanding the urge to urinate for so long. I haven't had to deal with this sort of

predicament in years. I cannot remember when it was, but I know that I was still a child back then.

And therein lies a major grievance.

What sort of

workplace are we running where a grown person has to worry about having enough time to take care of a basic need like using the restroom when they need to? What sort of operating workforce are we encouraging when we give them a job which often requires a great intake of fluid and then hand them this straining adherence policy? What makes management feel the need to see things in such an absolutist scope that they cannot differentiate between wasting company time and employees taking care of themselves? Those are my questions. I'd like some answers—answers in the form of action and compromise.

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The Authoritarianism of CapTel

Fellow workers, our daily habitat of CapTel has a nature that is fundamentally authoritarian and dependent upon our isolation from one another. Of course it can be said that any social or economic arrangement where a boss is present is a more authoritarian one, but I would like to specifically talk about CapTel here. The nature of the beast is unique in that we talk all day long, but rarely to each other. At our job, it's completely possible and wouldn't strike anyone as odd if a CA went an entire week only addressing their superiors and never their fellow CAs. This is a problem.

So who is the most superior in the hierarchy of CapTel? Rob Engelke is anyone's best guess, but has any CA actually met him? For the sake of anonymity, I won't say how long I've been a CA at CapTel, but I will say I've been here long enough to know that it's ridiculous that I've not once seen the head honcho in real life. Sure a lot of us know or have at least encountered our local call center managers or floor-ops directors high in the chain, but can we really say in any honesty that we know what they do all day? I'm not even suggesting that the problem is that Rob Engelke or Chris Briske or Delon or Garret are somehow "bad people" the problem is that we simply don't know.

As CAs, we're left in the dark when it comes to how the company functions and makes decisions. When considering that and the fact that much designated social interaction is done with our supervisors from a standpoint of grading us and keeping us in line, and even they are largely kept in the dark regarding the inner workings of CapTel, we can catch a clear sight of the ways CapTel is structured in an undemocratic manner. Every monitor a grade, every day a percentage, every month an average, every review period a parameter. Never is our humanity taken into consideration. Crunching our living activity into numbers is in itself an authoritarian program. The justification will always come as a rationality citing federal standards, but the buck has got to stop somewhere.

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Expecting us to remain in a cubicle smaller than a jail cell for 95% of our working day is absurd (breaks don't count because us working people had to fight for those in the first place as well). What madness is this expectation of productivity without so much as a \$15 an hour living wage? I've worked in factories with more leeway.

Suppose an 8 ½ hour work day including the half hour lunch:

8 hours is 480 minutes. Our 5% leeway is then 24 minutes to a work day. Surely checking our daily schedule, reserving a cube, starting the computer, and maybe adjusting the desk are totally workplace activities that constitute themselves as work rather than leisure or pleasure, so assuming someone doesn't want overtime and gets there and clocks in exactly at their start of shift, that's 4 minutes out of our adherence already despite actually working.

It's now time for our first break, and the rules state that no one is allowed on the call floor during their break. Were we to follow this rule, we would take our 15 minutes, and lose an additional 1 minute of aux from the time it takes us to get to our cube and start accepting calls. Next is lunch, and we all know that it takes an average of 2 minutes being out of aux to shut down the computer, clean your station, and then clock out. Assuming that we're not working through lunch, we'll clock back in, and spend another 4 minutes out of adherence repeating our clocking-in ritual described above.

Second break- same logic as the first break- lose 1 minute of aux. And finally to end the work day, take another 3 minutes to shut down the computer, clean your station, put your aux slip in the bin, and clock out.

If you've been doing the math, we went from a theoretical 24 minutes of averaged allowed daily aux time to only 9 real minutes out of a 480 minute theoretical workday as time we're granted without punishment to do as we need or do as we please. What free/democratic/egalitarian situation subjects a workforce to such rigid standards? (and let's not forget about the other rules too).

This short essay is just pinpointing only a few of the authoritarian problems of CapTel because there are so many other things to be said. If you have something to say, you should say it.

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In our workplace, turning us into machines through mechanical machinations, the only resemblance of humanity left within us is our voice. O! Poetic irony. Revolt.

Does CapTel Give A Damn About CAs or Not?

Every month we get to read testimonials from CapTel clients about what a good job we are doing and how important it is.

And every day it becomes more and more clear that CapTel does not agree. They show it every day in how they treat us. Amazing captionists with years of experience are fired or severely disciplined for incredibly petty infractions, like holding an object during a call or muttering something under their breath that VR does not even pick up on.

We are condescended to in meetings, reminded of rules we already know, and told to “act like adults” simply because some of us get frustrated with the work environment here and act like it. Instead of talking down to its employees, perhaps CapTel should consider why it is that some employees are disaffected enough to be slightly less than polite or bend the rules.

When I first started working here it seemed like an easy job. I felt like my friends who worked here and complained about it were exaggerating. But after a couple months it starts to wear on you and you begin to understand the discontentment. Incessant call volume, constant surveillance and policing of every single second of your day, feeling like you’re barely more than an extension of a software program; all of them take their toll.

The call content makes for another impediment to a livable workplace. Anybody who has worked as a CA is exposed to a relentless stream of misery, hatred and despair day in, day out (not

to mention incomprehensible accents). Of course you try to separate yourself from what you're hearing, to maintain some kind of mental distance, but it's hard when you're constantly bombarded with negative emotions from our clients. It's impossible to not be affected mentally to some extent. Of course the company can't control the content we hear but couldn't they take some steps to make other aspects of the job more rewarding?

That working at CapTel can be incredibly difficult, frustrating, and mentally draining is obvious to anyone who has set foot in our call center for more than five minutes. You can hear it in the voices of the folks who work here and see it in our body language and the way we type and touch the macros.

I wanted to write a more personal reflection on my individual experience at CapTel and how I struggle with it but then I realized that nothing in particular stands out; it's just a long tedious stretch of days and months that blend into each other filled with the struggle between absolute boredom and feeling so miserable I wanted to chuck my headset out a window and storm out forever.

The fact that captioning at CapTel under the conditions they provide is miserable is not really up for dispute. If you ask them, plenty of sups will tell you they absolutely loathed working as a captionist. Neither is the fact that CapTel clearly doesn't give a damn. They could provide a much better working environment by increasing staffing levels, bumping up wages a couple dollars an hour, and fixing/replacing faulty equipment among other changes but they're actually perfectly content with the way things are run now. They're happy to simply suck up those Medicare dollars and invest the bare minimum into wages and facilities, client and worker be damned.

Look at our turnover. While there are a number of long term employees it seems like a huge percentage of new hires don't even last a year and CapTel can barely keep the call center staffed despite constant hiring and training of new workers. When turnover is

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discussed it is dismissed as an inevitability but it isn't. It's common sense that if you treat people better and compensate them fairly they are far more likely to stick around. It's also

common sense that more experienced CAs caption better, meaning better service for the clients. Does CapTel make an effort to retain experienced workers? No! Paltry raises and arbitrary discipline ensure that most of us don't stick around for more than a year or two before we decide it's CapTel or our sanity and hit the road.

So overall, my assessment is that no, CapTel does not give two shits about the CAs here in Milwaukee and across the country who work day in and day out to ensure the smooth running of their business. Despite anemic efforts to increase morale such as "taco days" and goofy themed clothing days, it seems that the higher-ups in the this company would rather squeeze out a few extra bucks than step up and provide decent paying jobs and good working conditions. And it's a shame because now it's on us, the CAs who are already overburdened, to step up and make these changes ourselves.

Direct Action to Desired Results

Last May, I'd had it. Six straight months of headaches and a monitor while my pause pedal was malfunctioning, complete with harassing nitpicks and not a difficulty point to be had. Orange zone lighting and arbitrary, spiteful grading just weren't working. So I ruminated and stewed. I thought of everything I wanted to say, I mustered my courage, and I spoke.

It wouldn't have been the first time I'd begged for change, for a new assignment, but with renewed determination and a new member of

HR, I stated my case. Again.

I delivered my reasons, my timeframe, and an ultimatum. “On June 1st, I will be moved, or I will go to the doctor on worker’s compensation, and he or she will move me, after you pay a hefty bill.”

The HR lady cowered in agreement. Every word she tried to get in was interrupted.

Then I got the text from Supervisor Friendly, “*****, you’re still in Orange with *****.”

So when opportunity struck the next day and I spotted the HR lady, I thanked her for trying and told her that despite her best efforts, nothing changed. She was shocked and disgusted, and promised to fix it.

I came back from last break in a new zone with a new boss.

Suggestion from Anonymous Worker

There needs to be more communication between HR and employees on what the rules actually are. It appears that rules are constantly changing and people are being written up for stuff that they don’t even know they are doing wrong in the first place. Levels of punishment are also highly erratic, where the same offense can be a verbal warning one day, and automatic suspension the next. We feel like we are constantly walking on eggshells here and at first unintentional screw up can lose our jobs at any moment, and this does not make for a healthy workplace.

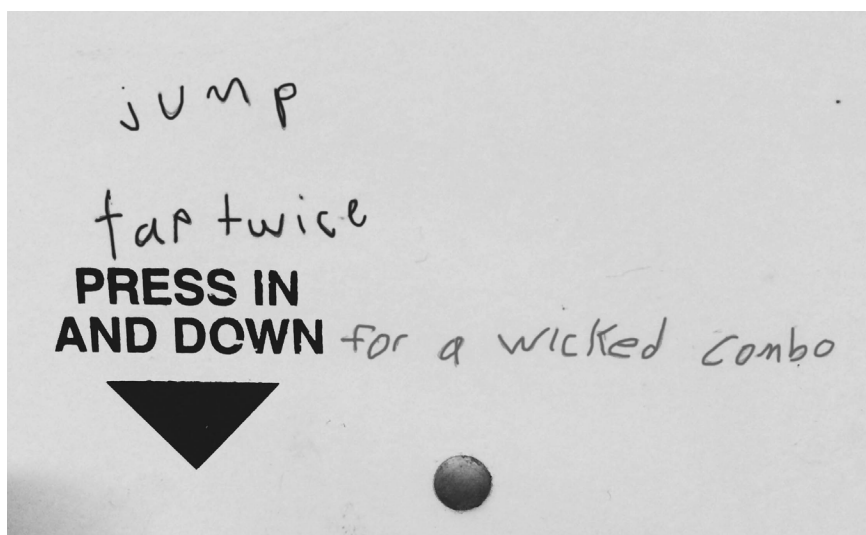
A Day in the Life

We Captel workers, like all other decent and responsible persons, try to maintain a positive and enjoyable attitude towards life. However, day-to-day functioning at Captel is known to inhibit this. From the start of the shift, we log in, accept calls, and are almost immediately bombarded with phones ringing off the hook...

A 45 minute call comes to an end, and we look forward for a little time to recover thoughts and empty the call out of our heads, regardless of the nature of the conversation, but within 90 seconds there is another chime- another bite at my ankle. We become progressively wearier, as anyone would, but we'll consider it lucky to get an LEA, and we simply cannot afford to risk a perfect attendance bonus. It pays for parking for almost an entire month, so we sit and wait as the day gets longer and our resolve gets shorter.

By the end of our shift, we have been a pharmacist, a nursing assistants, a computer technician, a best friend, an angry child, at least 100 robotic telemarketers, a banker, and doctor. We have traded stocks for others, filled prescriptions, made appointments, and canceled outings due to inclement weather. We have wished happy birthdays and informed people about their dearly departed. We have been called a machines, gnomes, and idiots, and we've denied all our principles for the sake of verbatim.

The only people we weren't all day were ourselves.



Artwork found in 12th floor men's bathroom